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Mary Jean Green
Dartmouth College

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Toward an Analysis of Fascist Fiction: The Contemptuous Narrator in the Works of Brasillach, Céline and Drieu la Rochelle

Abstract

Attempts to analyze the nature of French fascist literature have often foundered on the difficulties of defining fascism as a political ideology and on the apparent heterogeneity of the writers themselves. This paper seeks to discern the traces of political ideology in the fiction of Brasillach, Céline and Drieu la Rochelle, the three principal French fascist novelists of the 1930s, through an examination of the literary techniques used in the works themselves. In this reading, the feature common to the texts is not the expression of a collective enthusiasm often identified with fascism but rather the repeated use of a distanced, even contemptuous, narrative voice. This technique can be related to a recognized feature of fascist ideology, a spirit of social hierarchy and anti-egalitarianism and serves to distinguish these texts written under the sign of fascism from the fiction of the same period inspired by an ideology of the Left.

Keywords

French fascist literature, Fascism, political ideology, author, Brasillach, Céline, Drieu la Rochelle, French fascist novelist, 1930, collective, enthusiasm, narrative voice, social hierarchy, anti-egalitarianism, fascist ideology

TOWARD AN ANALYSIS OF FASCIST FICTION: THE CONTEMPTUOUS NARRATOR IN THE WORKS OF BRASILLACH, CÉLINE AND DRIEU LA ROCHELLE

MARY JEAN GREEN
Dartmouth College

Discussions of *littérature engagée* in the 1930s often seem to center on the great names of the French Left: André Malraux, Louis Aragon, Paul Nizan, even, to some extent, the young and relatively uncommitted Jean-Paul Sartre. Three important French novelists of the same period, however, identified themselves with fascism. Of these, the writer who has consistently claimed the greatest attention is Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose creation of a unique literary language has inspired a constant stream of critical studies. The reputation of Robert Brasillach suffered to some extent from his execution as a collaborator in 1945, but his memory has been kept alive by a loyal coterie of friends and admirers, including his brother-in-law, the literary scholar Maurice Bardèche. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, known for a long time primarily as the author of *Le Feu follet* (1931), the novel of decadence made into a film by Louis Malle, has, within the last decade, inspired a number of new critical and biographical studies.

There have, however, been few attempts to undertake a general analysis of the nature of French fascist fiction. This is in part because the notion of fascism itself is hard to pin down, existing as it did in many different manifestations. The problem is complicated even further by the fact that the three writers in question do not seem to conform to whatever general definitions are available on many important issues—or, for that matter, to agree among themselves, a point which is made convincingly by Tarmo Kunnas.¹ In attempting to discern the traces of political ideology in their fiction, my point of

departure will be not a preconceived notion of fascism or a set list of key issues but an examination of the literary techniques used in the texts themselves. In my reading, these texts exhibit the repeated use of a distanced, even contemptuous, narrative voice, a technique which can be clearly related to a recognized feature of fascist ideology and which serves to distinguish these texts written under the sign of fascism from the fiction inspired by an ideology of the Left.

As personalities, as political thinkers and as creators of fiction, these three men often seem poles apart. Unlike the intellectuals of the Left, who in the 1930s frequently participated in the same literary-political organizations, wrote for the same press and defended the same causes, these three writers of the Right seemed hardly to know one another. On those occasions when he emerged from self-imposed isolation, Drieu moved with a wealthy group of international "beautiful people." His few years of political activism involved him with the *Parti Populaire Français*, the openly fascist party of Jacques Doriot. Brasillach, who liked to surround himself with small groups of kindred souls, had been active in right-wing groups since his days at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. His political trajectory took him from the traditionally-oriented *Action Française*, where he headed the literary page at the age of twenty-two, to the direction of the notoriously antisemitic and increasingly pro-Nazi weekly *Je Suis Partout*. Unlike the other two, Céline had no active political involvement apart from his writing. This writing, however, included a clear statement of political attitude following his 1936 visit to Moscow and a series of vituperatively antisemitic pamphlets at the end of the decade in which he proclaimed his sympathy for Hitler. The political import of Céline's pamphlets has been much debated: in many ways, they seem closer to fictional creation than to the political essays produced by Drieu and Brasillach. Nevertheless, the pamphlets were taken seriously enough by some to figure importantly in Céline's postwar trial for collaboration. And, however the pamphlets are interpreted, their right-wing stance does not run counter to the tendencies found in his novels as well.

All three of these writers, then, openly identified themselves with some form of fascism. However, despite their various efforts to explain the nature of this identification, analysts have found it difficult, in all three cases, to locate a clearly-outlined political position in their works. Céline, of course, is the extreme case: he is as hard to pin down in his pamphlets as he is in his fiction, and the only

elements that seem to emerge clearly from the ideological chaos of his texts is a hysterical fear of war and a violent hatred of the Jew, who becomes an outsized figure summing up all the forces of oppression in the modern world. Drieu and Brasillach, at least, manage to discuss politics in standard expository prose required by their work as essayists and journalists. Even so, their political programs seem commonly to defy analysis. Speaking of Drieu, Brasillach and others of their colleagues, Raoul Girardet observes:

. . . fascism corresponds much more exactly to what could more appropriately be called a romanticism. . . . The attraction of fascism is above all that of a few great affective themes of a certain form of lyricism, the exaltation of certain sentimental and moral values. It is to the forces of the passions, it is to the imagination and the sensibility that French fascism aims primarily to address itself.²

Girardet's conclusion is a common one, shared by almost all those who attempt to submit these works to serious political analysis. In his political biography of Brasillach, William R. Tucker makes a similar point: "It is significant, in this context, that he never attempted to formulate a definition of fascism. . . . At the same time, however, his intuitive approach to politics prompted an awareness that fascism was as much a response to the movement of time, a style, and a feeling of exhilaration, as it was a political creed."³ In analyzing the positions taken by Drieu, Paul Nizan stated at one point, "Drieu's ideas seem to me less political than erotic."⁴

When their most explicit definitions of fascism are described by scholars as "romanticism," "poetry" or "lyricism," it is not surprising that these men saw literature as the most appropriate means of giving expression to their political vision. In Céline's case, as has been said, all his writings may easily be subsumed under this category. In the work of Drieu and Brasillach, lines between fiction and non-fiction may more easily be drawn. Nevertheless, it can be argued that their most detailed statements of commitment to fascism are embodied in novels. For Drieu, this text is *Gilles*, published in 1939 and summing up his experience of the interwar years. For Brasillach, it is *Les Sept Couleurs*, also published in 1939, a work whose real subject is not the love triangle at the center of the plot but the development of European fascism.

If these three fascist writers saw literature as a privileged means of expression, there is reason to examine their fiction for signs of an inscription of this political ideology. The quest for precise statements on political or social issues has already been undertaken by a number of critics, and it has done little to bring out elements of commonality to fascist fiction. The most extensive study of these three writers has been undertaken by Tarmo Kunnas (*Drieu la Rochelle, Céline, Brasillach et la tentation fasciste*), who examines their views on fifteen issues identified with fascism. Not surprisingly, he finds differences among the three French fascists on almost every item. My approach, therefore, will be a different one. I will examine their fiction for evidence of the use of similar fictional techniques, techniques which might serve to differentiate works produced under the sign of fascism from treatments of often similar subjects produced by major writers of the Left in the 1930s.

Taking as a possible point of departure what is perhaps the most striking feature of the phenomenon of European fascism in the inter-war years, we might expect to find in the fiction techniques that make possible the expression of a collective exhilaration, a mass movement of immense vitality. This was the aspect of Nazism emphasized with such intensity by Leni Riefenstahl in her film, *Triumph of the Will*. It is also the aspect most commented upon by Brasillach in his journalistic and fictional accounts of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. In *Les Sept Couleurs* (1939), one of his protagonists is impressed by the collective spirit which animates the Nazi youth camps and the Nuremberg rallies and by the spontaneous popular enthusiasm for the Italian fascist regime. It is this eminently fascist spirit of collective enthusiasm that the narrator (and Brasillach) would most like to see in France, uniting the various classes and allowing them to transcend their mundane lives. In his posthumously-published work, *Les Captifs*, written in 1940, Brasillach's pro-fascist protagonist is even able to participate in an analogous experience in the French right-wing riots of February 1934. However, this example stands alone in Brasillach's work, and the description of collective phenomena, from an observer's standpoint, is a feature of only a few of his novels—those written specifically in praise of foreign fascism at the very end of the prewar period. The collective spirit seems totally absent from the work of Drieu and Céline, whose protagonists seem to abhor group activities of all sorts. Like Brasillach's protagonist, Drieu's Gilles is excited by the February riots, but he remains isolated from the crowd.

Collective experience, in fact, seems to be more a property of the fiction of the Left. The influence of Jules Romains's *unanimisme* is felt strongly in Nizan's *Le Cheval de Troie* (1935), for example, where a Communist crowd involved in a riot is described as a single entity, animated by a common will. Mass rallies receive a similarly positive portrayal at the conclusion of Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle* (1934) and *Les Beaux Quartiers* (1936) and even among non-Communist leftists like Malraux in *L'Espoir* (1937) and *Le Temps du mépris* (1935). In several instances in the fiction of the Left, the protagonist is itself a group, whose destiny is the real subject of the work. This is true in *Le Cheval de Troie* as well as in novels of the non-Communist Left, like Louis Guilloux's *Compagnons* (1931) and Eugène Dabit's *L'Île* (1934). The experience of collective identity, then, in its various literary expressions, is not an exclusive property of the Right—or even a characteristic one.

In reading the fictional production of Brasillach, Céline and Drieu, it is exactly the opposite phenomenon that emerges as a constant. Rather than emphasizing a collective experience, the fascist fiction here under consideration repeatedly presents the perspective of a narrator or protagonist who is clearly distanced from those around him. Moreover, this narrator/protagonist tends to view other characters with an attitude of condescension, even of contempt. Brasillach, the champion of fascist camaraderie, might seem to present an exception to this contention, especially in his later novels. But when they are not dealing with a small group of kindred souls, Brasillach's narrators exhibit the same remote and contemptuous attitudes found in the more solitary protagonists of Céline and Drieu.

Interestingly, this type of contemptuous stance was recognized by leftist intellectuals of the time as a characteristic of fascism. Malraux chose *Le Temps du mépris* as the title of the only novel in which he directly portrayed the effects of fascism. The same word recurs again and again in leftist discussions of fascist writings. In his review of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, for example, Nizan's alertness to this attitude of contempt made him one of the few leftist critics to see that the early Céline, for all his condemnation of war and oppression, was not really one of them. He recognizes the truth of Céline's harsh picture of the capitalist world, but adds, "Céline is not one of us: it is impossible to accept his profound anarchy, his contempt, his general attitude of repulsion, which makes no exception for the proletariat."⁵

Narrative distance is particularly apparent in the fascist novels

set in the lower-class urban milieu. The era of the Great Depression, not surprisingly, witnessed a resurgence of the social novel, which had been out of literary fashion since the eclipse of Zola and the naturalists at the end of the nineteenth century. This resurgence was accompanied by a number of manifestos and movements, such as the "populist" and "proletarian" schools of literature and, of course, the ever-evolving doctrines of the Communists. As might have been expected, many of the works that constituted this new "literature of the people" were sympathetic to the goals and ideals of the Left. However, Céline also, quite naturally, set his two novels of the 1930s, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and *Mort à crédit* (1936), in the milieu of the Parisian petite bourgeoisie and working classes in which he had spent his life. Brasillach seemed simply to enjoy observing the inhabitants of the poor districts of Paris where he had lived as a student,⁶ and he made them the subject of two of his novels of the same period, *L'Enfant de la nuit* (1934) and *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* (1936).

Although they are set in similar lower-class districts of Paris, Céline's and Brasillach's novels depict radically different worlds. Brasillach's fictional universe seems drawn from the René Clair musicals he so admired and is certainly closer to fairy tale and ballet than to the sordid realism of the naturalists. Céline's novelistic vision, on the other hand, turns the same Parisian reality into a nightmare world of asphyxiation and putrefaction, where the inhabitants carry on hostilities that parallel and even surpass those of the Great War.

Despite these differences, the ideological stance which emerges from these novels is strikingly similar. At first glance, they seem relatively unburdened by ideological freight, unlike much of the social fiction of the Left. They lack the didactic tone that characterizes, in particular, Communist writers like Nizan and Aragon, and they seem free even of the commitment to improving the lot of the poor which is apparent in all the fiction of the Left. However, the portrayal of the lower classes in the fiction of Brasillach and Céline is almost unrelievedly negative. Many of the working-class characters in all four novels are shown to be slovenly, alcoholic, and brutal, if not openly homicidal. The parents of "little Anne" in *L'Enfant de la nuit* and of the two runaway boys in *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* share these characteristics, as do the inhabitants of La Garenne-Rancy in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and the grandmother's tenants in *Mort à crédit*. It is

true that even writers of the Left sometimes depict the moral failings of the lower classes—Eugène Dabit offers a good example. But when they do, they are careful to trace the origins of these failings to a context of economic deprivation.

The negative view of the lower-class milieu found in the social novel of the Right is the consequence of a distance that separates reader and characters. This distance is established through the interposition of an observing intelligence who is not identified with the lower-class setting and who mediates the reader's perception of events. In Céline's two novels this function is performed by the first-person narrators. While he shares the same milieu and is similarly persecuted and deprived, the Bardamu of *Voyage* is clearly at some distance from the other characters, observing them with shock, disgust and even pity, from a vantage-point on the margins of their lives (as in the initial episode where he appears symbolically peering out from behind a tree). In the second half of the book, Bardamu's chosen position as a doctor in the Paris slums (this was, of course, also Céline's position in real life) guarantees him a marginal status with ample opportunity to observe. It was, in fact, this particular balance of objectivity and involvement that attracted him to the medical profession in the beginning. And it is significant that Céline chose to emphasize Ferdinand's situation as a doctor in the framing episode that introduces *Mort à crédit*, which otherwise shows the protagonist as a child, thoroughly enmeshed in his milieu. This liminal passage draws the reader's attention clearly to the stance of the retrospective narrator, who maintains a distance which Julia Kristeva sees as characteristic of Céline: "keeping himself in the horror but at a very small distance, infinitesimal and immense. . . ."⁷

Céline's narrator/protagonists are not totally insensitive to the importance of economic factors. It was for this reason that his first novel, *Voyage*, was warmly received by critics of the Left. While economic deprivation makes the characters' lives unpleasant, however, it does not really seem to account for the perversity of their actions, which seem rather to result from tendencies inherent in their natures. This impression is made explicit in the many misanthropic aphorisms that punctuate Céline's texts. It is true that Céline's characters in all social classes display a similarly destructive egoism; nevertheless, his narrators present a particularly negative view of the poor, who seem to wallow in their miserable lives.

This argument against economic determinism is buttressed by

examples of natures whose innate goodness enables them to rise above desperate economic conditions. These characters, who constitute a visible elite in Céline's fictional world, elicit an unusual sympathetic response from the narrator. They include the warm-hearted prostitute Molly and the self-sacrificing Alcide in *Voyage*, and Grandmother Caroline and Uncle Edouard in *Mort à crédit* (it is not surprising that Brasillach's review of *Voyage* comments favorably and at length on Molly and Alcide, a fact which underlines the affinities between these two writers).⁸ These characters' admirable qualities, however, have no effect on the world. Alcide possesses "enough tenderness to renew a whole world," but, Bardamu comments sadly, "it could not be seen."⁹ In Céline's pessimistic vision, energy and concern for others can bring no immediate benefit to the characters themselves. All will undoubtedly share the fate of Grandmother Caroline, who perishes in a heroic battle against the blocked toilets of her filthy tenants, a typically Célinian struggle against engulfment in excrement.

While Brasillach uses narrative strategies different from Céline's in his two social novels, he is careful to maintain a similar distancing. In *L'Enfant de la nuit* the first-person narrator, named Robert B., is an unemployed interior decorator who has come to live in their poor district of Vaugirard while he is temporarily down on his luck (naturally, he leaves as soon as he gets another job). His background and education raise him above the people he describes, and he observes them with the bemused and tolerant fascination of an outsider—mirroring the position of Brasillach himself when he lived in the same district. In *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* Brasillach adopts a technique of variable focalization, which permits him greater access to the lives of diverse characters. However, this technique provides only a thin disguise for the voice of an omniscient (and often moralizing) narrator; moreover, the dominant perspective is that of the group of three students whose framing story (the eternal Brasillachian tragedy of the passing of youth) parallels the drama of the two young delinquents. It is through the clearly middle-class students that the reader is introduced to the lower-class characters, and the students' departure for summer vacation is the factor that puts an end to their own and the reader's brief sojourn with the poor.

In contrast to Céline, Brasillach's fiction seems oblivious to economic realities. The causes of moral weakness and perversion are presented as innate and therefore not responsive to social forces. Both

"little Anne" of *L'Enfant de la nuit* and the brothers of *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* are rescued from their milieu by kindly older women who, although poor themselves, manage to satisfy the children's material wants. Nevertheless, Anne persists in falling in love with a ne'er-do-well and, for his sake, commits a cruel robbery. Similarly, the two brothers begin a career of petty shoplifting and end up brutally murdering an old woman they are trying to rob.

As in the case of Céline, however, many of Brasillach's characters who live in equally deprived circumstances are able to lead lives of devotion to moral and aesthetic ideals. These people may be said to constitute an aristocracy of the poor in his work, and they are the characters upon whom his narrators lavish their attention. They include the bird-peddler himself, who, although left destitute by the Depression, prefers to admire his birds and flowers rather than sell them and is supremely happy with the freedom of his wandering life. Another of Brasillach's favorite cases is the family of eight who live in an abandoned truck in the *zone*. Despite these rather unpleasant conditions, they are admirably clean—a factor which appears to rank high on the narrator's scale of values—and they would not think of parting with their sole possession, a silver-plated violin. Like the shoemaker-poet of *L'Enfant de la nuit*, the primary values of these characters are aesthetic, and they are above material concerns.

The narrative distance found in Céline and Brasillach is not at all characteristic of the Left-oriented social novels of the 1930s. In general, the narrative strategies adopted by writers of the non-Communist Left correspond to the well-known definition of the "populist" novel put forth by Gabriel Marcel: "a novelist is populist insofar as, taking as heroes men of the people, he succeeds in preserving with respect to them a *non-spectacular* attitude. . . . They become not only 'you' but 'we.'"¹⁰ In the works of writers often included in this category, like Eugène Dabit and Louis Guilloux, all of the lower-class people are treated with sympathetic understanding and their actions are illuminated from within. This is true whether the narrative is homodiegetic or heterodiegetic, focalized through one or more of the characters. Characters who perform inexplicably perverse acts like Brasillach's delinquents or Céline's filthy tenants could not exist in such novels.

Aragon and Nizan, the major Communist novelists, seem to prefer a return to the traditional omniscient narrator à la Balzac. Although it flew in the face of then-prevailing literary fashion, this

device was well-adapted to the Communists' desire to give the reader a comprehensive Marxist analysis of French society. The omniscient narrator of the Communists, however, could always be counted upon to adopt what has been called "the proletarian point of view." While the Communist writers of the 1930s do not limit themselves to portraying only the working classes, a Communist novel which does do so, Nizan's *Le Cheval de Troie*, adopts as its privileged point of view the perspective of the Communist worker group.

The adoption of the point of view of lower-class characters tends, especially in the so-called "populist" novels, to coincide with a restrained, realistic treatment of the subject matter, a treatment appropriate to the perspective of the characters themselves. Similarly, the distanced narration of Brasillach and Céline appears in conjunction with a departure from realistic standards of portraying characters and settings.

Céline's secondary characters are more like two-dimensional caricatures, whose salient features are often stressed by the whimsical names with which Céline endows them: Madame Erote, who runs a brothel; the Henrouilles, whose life is literally rusting away. Similarly, in Céline's description of the urban settings, certain features are stressed and restressed until they take on the exaggerated nightmare qualities of the Célinian fictional universe. In the opening description of the Paris suburb of La Garenne-Rancy—already well-described by its name, which evokes a rancid atmosphere and hunted rabbits—the page overflows with vocabulary relating to slimy excrement. The same is true of the description of the Passage des Bérésinas in *Mort à crédit*, where the clients urinate on the shopkeepers and where the father spends his time shoveling shit. Everything with which Céline's narrators come into contact is deformed by a vision that seeks out and exaggerates the most repugnant features.

Brasillach, too, moves away from simple realism in rather the opposite direction. His vision tends to play down or entirely overlook ugliness, to mute colors, to bring out hidden beauty. His preferred time of day in these Parisian novels is twilight, and his attention is attracted especially by the unusual and picturesque—like the bird-peddler or the shoemaker-poet—rather than by the typical or mundane. Likewise, in his descriptions of the city, Brasillach is interested primarily in picturesque and unusual corners, where

vestiges of a bucolic past can be discerned beneath the urban grime. Such a poetization of the urban reality was clearly an important part of Brasillach's intention, and it is no less a deformation than Céline's. Brasillach was always attracted to non-realistic art—*Le Grand Meaulnes*, the films of René Clair—and he referred to *L'Enfant de la nuit* as an explicit attempt to go against the conventions of the currently fashionable literary populism.¹¹

Unlike Céline's fiction and some of Brasillach's, Drieu's novels are set in the world of wealth and political power which he himself frequented. The French masses are not at the center of his vision. On the few occasions when his protagonist is forced to confront them, however, he characteristically reacts with contempt and disgust. This is true in *Gilles* when, travelling through the countryside to visit his old guardian, Gilles envisions the French peasantry as the straggling remnants of a defeated army, closed up in their unmoving conservatism as in their shuttered houses.¹²

Despite its more prosperous setting, however, Drieu's fiction provides ample evidence of the use of a distanced and contemptuous narrator-protagonist. His 1934 novella, *La Comédie de Charleroi* is, as Frédéric Grover has contended, a work important for Drieu's literary and political development.¹³ By looking back at his combat experience at Charleroi from a distance of some twenty years, Drieu's narrator is able to define a political position for the present, and it is not coincidental that this work should appear in the same year as an essay which marked an important turning point in Drieu's own political evolution, *Socialisme fasciste*.

The first-person narrator of *La Comédie de Charleroi* is a veteran, returning to the Charleroi battlefield after the war with the mother of a dead comrade. Despite her total inability to comprehend the experience of war (a charge which had become a commonplace of war fiction), this woman, aided by her wealth, has made a career out of being the mother of a dead soldier, an enterprise for which the narrator does not attempt to conceal his disgust.

Through her callous exploitation of the war dead, the character of Mme Pragen expands to become a caricature of the entire French postwar power elite. Physical descriptions of her abound, and all tend to underscore her moral failings. She is, first of all, a sham: the narrator sees her as costumed, made up, engaged in theatrical gestures. More seriously, she embodies the decadence that Drieu sees

as destroying the French elite. By focusing on her, the novella shows power in French society being exercised by a character who is both a Jew and a woman, both perversions of the natural order according to Drieu. Moreover, Mme Pragen is even incapable of fulfilling her function as a woman: cold and emaciated, she seems unable to nurture and she has, in fact, sent her frail son out to die. More than an individual, Mme Pragen is a symbol of the French Republic, a fallen Marianne who has become permanently incapacitated by the Great War.

While making clear his contempt for the bourgeois caricatures in the novella's frame story, the narrator exhibits a scarcely less hostile attitude toward the "comrades" who share the Charleroi trenches, most of whom remain nameless. As a soldier, he had looked down on the boorish peasants who made up the ranks, while detesting with equal vehemence the petty bureaucracy of the officers. The pervasive mediocrity of the army constituted for the narrator, as he says, the greatest source of his suffering in the war. At one point before the battle, overwhelmed by contempt—contempt is the word used in the text—for the milieu in which he finds himself, he had even contemplated suicide.

On the battlefield itself, the narrator had sought out opportunities to be alone, even under conditions which were hardly propitious: "I charged out through the bullets, with a strange elation. Elation at being alone and at separating myself, as much as distinguishing myself from the others, by an astonishing act."¹⁴ At only one point does he attain a certain unity with the other men in his unit, when he leads a heroic but unsuccessful charge against the enemy. The movement of the pronouns in the staccato sentences which describe the movement from isolation through collective enthusiasm to collective failure records the progressive aggregation of *je* and *ils* into *nous*. But such a collective experience may occur only on very special terms for Drieu's protagonist: the masses are acceptable only when they are willing to submit themselves to the magnetic attraction of a leader, a *chef*, preferably the narrator himself or another who embodies his will. The momentary experience of himself becoming a *chef* is for the narrator the climactic moment of his wartime experience and of the novella: "I was a leader. I wanted to take off with all these men around me, increase myself through them, increase them through me and launch us all together, with me in the lead, across the universe" (*Comédie*, p. 70). This moment is the closest any of Drieu's

protagonists comes to participating in a collective experience. However, as is indicated by the predominance of first-person singular pronouns in the passage quoted, its nature is, in reality, far less collective than individual.

Drieu's long novel *Gilles* (1939), which chronicles many of the political and intellectual conflicts of the interwar years, follows much the same pattern observed in *La Comédie de Charleroi*. The use of third-person narration rather than first-person does little to conceal the fact that all is filtered through the mind of Gilles, who is an older version of the Charleroi veteran. As in the earlier work, the protagonist's vision reduces bourgeois characters to caricatures and the lower classes to anonymous and generally inert masses. Like Drieu's earlier narrator, the protagonist of *Gilles* is characteristically isolated from others.

Gilles's contempt is frequently directed against women characters who, as was the case with Mme Pragen, are often chosen as representatives of larger social groups.¹⁵ This is a technique also used to some extent by Céline, particularly in his distorted portrayal of Lola, the rich American volunteer in *Voyage*. In *Gilles* the protagonist's first wife Myriam is the Jewish intellectual, complete with unbecoming glasses; his mistress Dora represents the rich American, and his second wife Pauline, eaten away by cancer, comes to symbolize a decadent France, dying in the aftermath of the February 1934 riots.

The cruellest caricature of a woman occurs in the comic debacle that pits the traditional French intellectual Establishment against the raucous young Surrealist group (called the *Révolte* group in the text). At the ceremony honoring the aged Boniface Saint Boniface, the old establishment is represented by the senile poet, who says nothing, and by a woman who speaks on his behalf. Again, Drieu represents the decadence of traditional society by using a woman as its mouthpiece, and an ugly bluestocking at that, who displays straw-like hair and worn furs along with her Legion of Honor. The Surrealists—despite or perhaps because of the fact they were at one time Drieu's close friends—are treated no more kindly. In the long central passage of the novel devoted to Gilles's involvement with the *Révolte* group, Cael (Breton) is presented as a sham and Galant (Aragon) as a weak-chinned sycophant and closet pederast. When Gilles walks out on their antics in the end, he sees them as "feeble little intellectuals."¹⁶

During the Boniface Saint Boniface testimonial their acts, intended to be heroic gestures of revolt, are reduced, in Gilles's denigrating vision, to total absurdity: he is reminded of a battle in a henhouse.

As in *La Comédie de Charleroi*, the major role of the masses is to serve as an anonymous backdrop for the enthusiasms of the protagonist. This is particularly paradoxical when the culminating scene in the novel, as in *La Comédie de Charleroi*, involves what purports to be a collective experience: the riots of February 1934. In Gilles's retrospective analysis, he sees the riots as a spontaneous outburst of collective vitality which need only the direction of the proper leader in order to change the social order. As he describes the energy and dynamism of the crowd, he uses the same metaphors of vital flow so characteristically employed by Nizan in describing Communist marches in *Le Cheval de Troie* and *La Conspiration*. But, although he is present at the riots, Gilles himself does not participate in this collective energy, retaining his usual solitary stance. He feels himself surrounded, in Drieu's often-quoted phrase, by "the divine couple, Fear and Courage, who preside over war," but his response to this feeling, as in the war, is to strike out alone: "He threw himself against the crowd which was flowing back. . . . He ran toward the obelisk and beyond. He was alone" (*Gilles*, p. 596). Even when he attempts to participate, he does not succeed: "Gilles ran everywhere to the points of affluence which appeared to him and, when he arrived, out of breath, he found a deserted square of asphalt. . . ." (*Gilles*, p. 596). And Gilles's response to the experience of the riots is, in the end, a choice of solitude, which seems to be the direct result of his publicly-announced conversion to fascism. He breaks with all contacts in France and goes off to die a solitary death with Franco's troops in the Spanish Civil War.

Drieu's work, like Céline's, ends with his protagonist isolated from others by his own choice. But this profound isolation has been inherent in the narrative voice from its first appearance. Brasillach's protagonists, too, are cut off from all but a few worthy souls by an attitude of innate superiority. The use of a distanced narrative voice that presents a denigrating view of all which comes within its purview is consequent with an important strain of French fascist thought. Despite the importance of collectivism for German national-socialism, Italian fascism, and even the French right-wing philosophy articulated by Maréchal Pétain, the three French fascist writers remain profoundly individualistic, as Tarmo Kunnas shows with

reference to their political statements. But, Kunnas continues, what is at issue here is less a matter of individualism than of an attitude toward social hierarchy. One aspect of fascism that appears strongly in the work of all three writers is its anti-egalitarianism:

It is the antidemocratic spirit, the spirit of hierarchy, which, along with corporatism, dominated the whole of fascist ideology. This antiegalitarian thought attracted our writers much more than the antiindividualism, because they think less of individual liberty than of the liberty of superior individuals. They are convinced that men are not equal. . . . (Kunnas, p. 180)

The central importance of this anti-egalitarianism to French fascists was registered by two contemporary writers of the Left as they sought to portray fascist characters. It is significant that, in their literary treatment of fascism, both Nizan and Sartre also adopt the device of the distanced and contemptuous narrative voice. This is particularly striking in the case of Nizan's portrayal of Professor Lange, the fascist character in *Le Cheval de Troie*. As has been said earlier, this novel is dominated by the perspective of the small group of Communist workers when it does not use unanimist techniques to express the collective enthusiasm of a mass movement. In opposition to the perspective of the Communist crowd and in counterpoint to it is the isolated perspective of Lange, who, as Drieu's Gilles would later do, often moves against the flow of the crowd. His contempt for the masses—a contempt, in Nizan's view, mixed with envy—finally leads him to fire at a young worker, touching off a volley of shots in which several people are killed. Contempt in *Le Cheval de Troie* is not a neutral attitude but an almost inevitable cause of violence, just as Lange's earlier disgust at a woman sleeping in the street had prompted him to awaken her with a kick.

Much the same is true of Sartre's Lucien Fleurier, protagonist of his novella about the evolution of a fascist, "L'Enfance d'un chef." Here, too, the narrator is cut off from the world, and, as he finds his identity with a group of young fascists—much like those idealized by Brasillach—he develops the characteristic attitude of contempt, which finds its natural expression, as with Nizan, in the savage beating of a dark-skinned foreigner. The story ends with Lucien, revelling in his bright new self-image, watching the crowd in a Paris

café: "All those dagos were floating in a dark heavy liquid whose ripples nudged their soft flesh, picking up their arms, moving their fingers, playing with their lips. The poor guys! Lucien almost felt sorry for them."¹⁷ In their portraits of fascists, Nizan and Sartre implicitly recognize that a fascist mentality is not just a set of political beliefs but a question of attitude. In the work of Brasillach, Céline and Drieu, this attitude is embedded deeply in the fiction.

NOTES

1. Tarmo Kunnas, *Drieu la Rochelle, Céline, Brasillach et la tentation fasciste* (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1972). See also Paul Serant, *Le Romantisme fasciste* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1959).

2. Raoul Girardet, "Notes sur l'esprit d'un fascisme français 1934-1939," *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 5, No. 3 (1955), 532.

3. William R. Tucker, *The Fascist Ego: A Political Biography of Robert Brasillach* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p. 3.

4. Paul Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, ed. Susan Suleiman (Paris: Grasset, 1971), p. 186 (translation mine).

5. In *Pour une nouvelle culture*, pp. 44-45 (translation mine).

6. His brother-in-law Maurice Bardèche states in his introduction to *Le Marchand d'oiseaux*: "This poet of Paris really explored nothing of Paris: he observed the districts where he lived" (in *Oeuvres complètes*, I [Paris: Au Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1963], p. 316; translation mine).

7. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 169 (translation mine).

8. This essay is reprinted in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Céline* (Paris: Garnier, 1976), pp. 100-05.

9. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932; rpt. Paris: Folio, 1975), p. 208 (translation mine).

10. Gabriel Marcel, review of *Angelina*, in *L'Europe Nouvelle*, 1, No. 17, 148 (translation mine).

11. In his dedication in the copy of *L'Enfant de la nuit* he sent to his fellow critic Ramón Fernández, Brasillach termed the work an "anti-populist novel."

12. Except for a certain idealization by the traditional Right, the French peasantry does not fare well in the political novels of the 1930s. The peasants are excoriated for

their deadening conservatism by writers as politically diverse as Eugène Dabit in *La Zone verte*, Roger Martin du Gard in *Vieille France*, and Céline in the last section of *Mort à crédit*.

13. Frédéric Grover, *Drieu La Rochelle and the Fiction of Testimony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 58.

14. *La Comédie de Charleroi* (1934; rpt. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1970), p. 42 (translation mine). All citations in my text refer to this edition.

15. See, in this context, the article by Thomas M. Hines, "Myth, Misogyny and Fascism in the Works of Drieu la Rochelle," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 24 (1978), 197-207.

16. *Gilles* (1939; rpt. Paris: Folio, 1973), p. 487 (translations mine). All citations in my text refer to this edition.

17. *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 217 (translation mine).